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ABSTRACT

A survey of first-year high school students of English as a Second Language (ESL) (n=44) investigated their feelings about dialogue journal writing, including what they had learned, what they enjoyed reading and writing, reactions to teacher-generated questions, journal effect on oral English skills, desire to continue the journals, and other responses. The students had been writing journals for about 6 months. It was found that even after 6 months' interaction through journals, the survey revealed things both teacher and students were unaware of. The journals had more appeal to students than was manifested in student classroom behavior; students did not understand that they would get teacher responses of about the same length as their entries; some students needed explicit instruction in selection of topics; and some students appreciated teacher questions more than others. It is concluded that the journals themselves do not always provide teachers with adequate information about student preferences, understanding, or opinions, and that this exercise was useful in enhancing the teacher's understanding. (MSE)

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Student Feedback on Dialogue Journals

> ...oral and written language development, as does all learning, grows out of personal knowledge and interests, occurs in interaction with others, grows out of diverse experiences and take diverse forms, and takes a great deal of time.(Peyton, 1993, p. 3)

The ESL classroom is normally composed of a teacher and a group of students. Together they interact and learn. Acquiring knowledge in the classroom is a priority for both teachers and students. Students need to become able to use the target language for different reasons including writing pen pals, passing examinations, and going abroad. Teachers find it helpful to learn about their students in order to know and teach them better.

Normally, classroom teachers first become familiar with their students as a group. While this knowledge is important, teachers also need to understand their students as individuals. Without this knowledge how can teachers utilize students' personal knowledge and interests as Peyton suggests? Dialogue journals are one option for such student based language development.

Each dialogue journal (Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed, and Morroy, 1984; Staton, Shuy, Peyton, and Reed, 1988) is a private written conversation recorded in a notebook and handed back and forth between teacher and student. In journal writing with students, teachers receive continuous feedback concerning the students' comprehension abilities (Reed, 1993, p. 35), their ideas, concerns, and questions (Adkins, 1988, p. 15), and the effectiveness of specific lessons (Jones, 1991, p. 122).

Feedback is of great assistance to teachers and helps them to interact with their students. Feedback also enables teachers to understand the effectiveness of their instruction and interaction with each student. It tells teachers when they are facilitating students' learning and when they need to reexamine their actions. The journals, however, provide only sporadic feedback about the actual journal writing itself.

In order to examine students' thoughts and feelings about journal writing with their teacher a questionnaire was administered to a class of 44 first year high schools students in the target language. The students had been journal writing for approximately six months. The questionnaire asked what they learned, what they enjoyed reading and writing, for their reactions towards teacher generated questions, if the written journals helped their spoken English, whether or not they wanted to continue the journals, and if so why. There was also a section for comments.

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Student Learning

Although the teacher originally introduced the dialogue journals to the students as a written conversation, they predominantly responded that they had learned new vocabulary and how to create and write sentences. They responded:

> I learned how to make up sentences.
>
> I learned sentence pattern and many new words. So I was used to write.

Some students described their learning as containing both linguistic and cultural elements. The one to one interaction in the journals provided deeper communication and understanding for some students than the actual class did. In class each student was one of many, but in the journals they were individuals receiving the teacher's full attention. One student wrote:

> I learned to make English sentence. And I understood American events. I understood Japanese and Americans look at things differently in various ways.

Students also thought that reading and studying the teacher's entries and creating their own had helped their knowledge of grammar. One student wrote:

> I learned new words, new sentences, and new grammar.

Other students commented on having learned both new and idiomatic expressions. They did not explain what expressions they had learned. The teacher remembered having written and explained a number of expressions including "No pain, no gain." and "It's a small world isn't it." in addition to others. Students wrote:

> I learned idiom and a way making sentences.
>
> I got some English expression.
>
> I learned English idioms by heart.

One positive student stated that she had learned to think of topics. A number of students, however, commented that they had nothing to write about. The positive student stated:

> I learned how to think topics.

One of the students without topics wrote:

> I want to stop because I don't have topics. I don't regularly writing topics in notebook.

Feedback such as this indicates that the teacher needs to explain more to the students about selecting topics and writing. Every student has something that they can write about from their school life, home life, something they have read or seen, or their plans for the future. The teacher can help the student to understand how to write about and develop these topics in a series of mini lessons or on a one to one basis.

What they enjoyed reading and writing

Student feedback indicates that most of them enjoyed the written conversation in the journals about American culture, hobbies, learning English, their lives, and the teachers' life. Students wrote:

> There are many communication between a teacher and students so that conversation notebook is very enjoyable.
>
> I enjoyed thinking topics. I enjoyed reading teacher's hobby. I enjoyed writing about my hobby. I enjoyed writing about my family. I enjoyed writing about my friends. I enjoyed reading teacher's notebook.

The teacher also shared this enjoyment. Students expressed themselves much more in their journals than they did in class. They communicated at greater length over a wider variety topics. The students' explanation of their enjoyment covered both the topics and the interaction with their teacher. Although a few students liked to read and write about themselves, most students preferred to write about themselves and the world around them while they preferred to read about the teacher and his world:

> I like to read about teacher's thought for class, teacher's daughter. And I like to read about America and several countries.
>
> I like to read about teacher's hobby and teacher's daughter.
>
> Because I want to know about teacher's hobby. For example teacher write about music, I know foreign country music. And I like child. So teacher wrote about daughter, I am happy.

Many students enjoyed writing, but some did not. The reading was far more popular with the students. The teacher had noticed the students' eagerness when he returned their journals and they quickly opened them to begin reading. One student described this anticipation:

> I enjoyed when my notebook gave back to me. Because I was expectation what It wrote.

The teacher also found that some students who appeared to lack interest in the journals actually were interested. One of

the best speakers in the class continuously wrote short dull entries about simple topics. She was capable of doing much more and did so in all other facets of the class. Her feedback about reading explained her interests, when she explained what topics she liked to read about in her notebook:

> I like everything. Everything is joyful.

She explained why she wanted to continue journal writing:

> I want to continue because I like to read your answer.

This feedback demonstrated that some of the students in the class did not understand that the teacher was writing the same length entries as the students. He explained to the students that his responses were of similar length to their entries. The teacher concluded with an analogy about letter writing. If you want to receive longer letters to read, then you have to write longer letters yourself. In the days following this explanation some students began to write longer entries.

Teacher Generated Questions

In the ESL classroom teachers often ask questions and the students reply. While this may be appropriate behavior in the classroom, it is not in dialogue journal writing. Peyton and Reed (1990, p. 62) suggest teachers refrain from asking many questions. This is to ensure that both students and teacher interact as equals in the written conversations.

If teachers always ask questions and the students always respond, the dialogue journals will cease to be written conversations and become written interviews. Therefore, in order to leave space for the students to initiate topics and write about subjects of interest to themselves, the teacher asked questions sparingly in the written journals. The teacher noticed that when he asked questions, the students responses often composed their entire entry. Thus, as time went by the teacher asked less and less questions. Some students were content with this:

> Because I can't speak English a little. And English can understand a little.

> If my teacher ask me, maybe I can't answer the question

They were concerned about their ability to understand and respond to the questions. They prefered not to be asked questions. Some students, however, liked to be asked questions for a variety of reasons.

> When I don't know, I want to learn to teacher. So teacher maybe ask me too,

if I don't understand teacher's question, I can study new words and English grammar.

They wanted the teacher to ask them questions just as they asked him questions. They wanted to learn from the questions. The underlying theme is that the students are interested in writing dialogue journals with a high degree of complementarity. That is, where the two writers write entries of approximately the the same length, ask similar quantities of questions, and both initiate topics with the same frequency. According to (Shuy, 1988, p. 137) the most effective journals are those with a high degree of complementarity. Some students wanted to have such effective journals and communicate equally with the teacher.

Improving Spoken English

Although there is no empirical data which supports the contention that dialogue journal writing helps students to improve their speaking, many researchers and students who have experience with dialogue journals believe it does. The students answering the questionnaire shared this belief and described a number of ways that it helped them.

Many words useful to speak and I can speak a lot of English.

I wrote many sentences. So I learned helpful when I talk with people.

When I speak English, I understand to do the construction of a sentence is useful.

Some students also thought that the journals had increased their self-confidence. In response to this question they wrote:

If I talk American, I am not afraid of making mistakes these days.

I came to do write English. I gained confidence a little in my own ability.

The students had effectively communicated in their journals. They had initiated topics, responded to questions, asked questions, and communicated in depth about a number of issues. That experience gave them confidence and enabled them to believe in their ability to communicate.

On Continuing Journal Writing

Thirty-six students wanted to continue the dialogue journals and eight wanted to stop. Earlier negative reactions towards dialogue journal writing had led the teacher to believe that more students than eight had wanted to stop and less than the thirty-six had wanted to continue. Students who wanted to continue provided a wide variety of reasons why. They wrote:

I want to continue because I like to talk to somebody. And I can learn a lot of things. I want to learn many things.

Because I want to more pursue of English, and I'm interested in answer from teacher.

The notebook is very fun. I want to used to speaking.

Many of these students were students who spoke little in class. Yet, given the opportunity to communicate free from the stress and pressure of the classroom, they did so at length and wanted to continue. Eight students wanted to stop the journals. Of the eight students three viewed the journals positively, but did not want to take the time or do the work. They explained:

I want to stop because it is a bother to write. But, I will probably regret.

Yes, I enjoyed the written conversation in my notebook... I don't have free time. I needs many free time.
The other five students made comments such as the following:

Because I don't like writing. I'm sorry.

I want to stop because I can't write English well and a lot.

But, I am taught by this conversation notebooks.

Comments

The students' comments included many statements similar to those in the other sections. They also provided new information such as the following comments:

I am not good at speak English. But I like writing notebook.

In notebook, I can write and think many topics. So I enjoyed written conversation notebook.

I learned many things by this book. For example, American writer, and singer. And I could know your way of thinking.

Long sentence reading and understanding was my weak point. But I could read and understand little by little, by this notebook. When I read this notebook, I don't know any words. So I often consult a dictionary for the meaning of a word. Consulting a dictionary can know many words. I don't think that consulting a dictionary is bitter. I also think that A man becomes learned by consulting a dictionary.

I want to write this notebook. And I think that continual effort is vital for the mastery of English. So I study English every day.

In the this section as well as other places in their questionnaires some students also wrote that they found their dialogue journals helpful for studying for their class tests. One of these students wrote:

I want to continue. Because I want to useful for the test.

Some students enjoyed the written conversations more than the oral ones in class because they could read, write, think, and understand at whatever pace they found appropriate. The time constraints of oral conversation often made communication difficult in class. The dialogue journals released the students from these constraints. The students felt that they were participating in the dialogue journals more than they did so in oral conversations. Other students wrote about using dictionaries and working hard at improving their English. They wrote that the notebooks helped.

Conclusion

The teacher received a substantial amount of feedback from the students over six months of journal writing. In spite of this, teacher and students were still unaware of certain points that the questionnaire and dialogue which followed helped to clarify. The teacher understood that the appeal of the journals varied from student to student. Some liked reading and writing, while some liked only the reading. Some liked neither. In class the students moaned and groaned about writing in their journals. They occaissionally protested that they could not write in their journals by the next due date or that they had too much homework from their other classes. The journals were far more popular, however, than the students manifested by their behavior in class.

The teacher became aware that students did not understand that they would get answers the same length as their entries. He explained that and as a result some students wrote more. The teacher was also unaware that the students found the journals useful for studying. He also learned that the some students needed explicit instruction and practice for selecting and developing topics. Lastly, the teacher understood better the delicate balance involved in asking questions. Some students wanted to be asked, while others did not. The questionnaire raised these issues, but additional written questionnaires could easily focus on different aspects about the journals and raise other issues.

The feedback from this questionnaire makes it clear that we, as teachers, require assorted methods of obtaining feedback. Even with the ever constant feedback and interaction of daily lessons and diaries in addition to the dialogue journals, the feedback from the questionnaire still gave the teacher new useful information. This information enabled the teacher to improve his interaction with the students in their journals and understand

the students and their journal writing better.

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